By Jeanne Fenter, Southeast Colorado Regional Tourism Group; Vickie Massam, Smart Growth Advocates president; and Wayne Snider, Fowler town administrator

POWERING A COMMUNITY

When Orson Squire Fowler bought the land that would one day become the Town of Fowler, he anticipated a great future for both Colorado and the town. O.S. Fowler envisioned community farms producing organic foods, livestock and a quality of life second to none.

Today, "Community Powered" is the slogan that exemplifies this rural community's goal of energy independence by harnessing the area's abundant wind, solar and biomass resources while implementing conservation. How is this sustainable vision being transformed into reality?

GOING GREEN HAS BEEN A HOT TOPIC of discussion at committee meetings, presentations, conferences and media throughout southeastern Colorado communities, the state and the nation. By bringing together the community in a diverse partners in a public-private partnership, the Town of Fowler is making "going green" a reality.

The first step includes taking stock of local consumption and resources to form the basis for developing an overall plan.

The overall plan began with a unique opportunity. Occupying a full block in the heart of town is Park School, built in stages in 1905, 1908, 1925 and 1954. Now, unoccupied since 2003, the property was given to the municipality by the Fowler School District (R4J). Considering the options facing similar communities of how to utilize a vacant property, the town envisioned a home for a much needed expansion of the Town Hall, public library and police department. However, this 13,000-square foot, brick two-story structure, had projected annual operational costs ($40,000) that were considered prohibitive.

Enter Town Administrator Wayne Snider, hired by Mayor Ray Wards and the town trustees in April 2007. Experienced in economic development and the emerging technologies of renewable energy, Snider brought a fresh perspective to the dilemma. Why not look at modern solutions to reduce the operational costs and, possibly, reduce energy costs for the entire community?

The Department of Local Affairs awardes two grants: $300,000 for the school rehabilitation and $60,000 for a Comprehensive Land Use Strategic Plan. The goal emerged to generate power for the town while developing an income stream that will assist in the development of its Comprehensive Land Use Plan with James van Hemert of the Rocky Mountain Land Use Institute, Sturm College of Law at the University of Denver. In addition, a $25,000 ACRE (Advancing Colorado's Renewable Energy) grant was awarded to conduct an energy audit of the town.

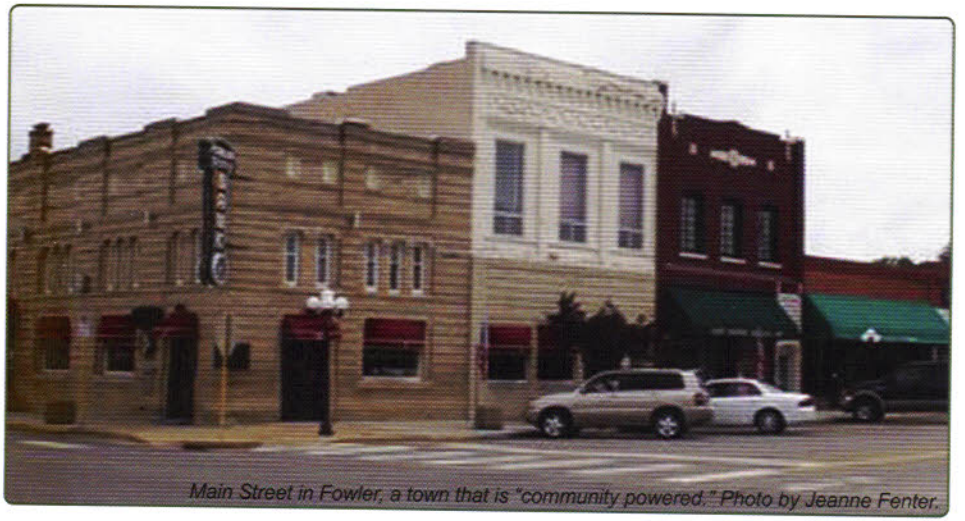
Revamping a previously denied application to the State Historical Fund to include geothermal for heating and the economic viability (through energy savings) of using the existing historic vacant building resulted in a $275,000 award. The $2.1 million project gathers unstoppable momentum.

At the same time, a grant by Great Outdoors Colorado was awarded to renovate the Town's Gerard Park across the street from the school. The park will be illuminated with solar powered LED lighting for the new sidewalk system, the new restrooms and bandstand.

Thus begins the "Greening of Fowler."

With the blessing of the Town administration, Snider set out to monitor the wind on Town property in Crowley County, a prime area adjacent to transmission lines. The land, just a few miles north of the town and Highway 96, has been called "Windy Point" for as long as people can remember. An anemometer was obtained on loan from Western Area Power Administration. Since late August 2007, the National Renewable Energy Laboratory has been analyzing the wind data.

Wind and solar power comprise only part of the solution for the community's independence from fossil fuels. Agricultural resources, including the



Main Street in Fowler, a town that is "community powered." Photo by Jeanne Fenter.

large cattle population, dictate that the Town find innovative methods such as anaerobic digestion to add to the mix of renewable technologies. Current data shows that a considerable amount of power can be generated utilizing locally available agricultural waste and cattle manure. Analysis of these resources is currently underway with the plan to share this information with the entire Arkansas Valley.

Since the inception of this ambitious plan to free Fowler from dependence on outside non-renewable energy sources, the following partners have been most generous with their time and knowledge to help Fowler achieve its goals: the National Renewable Energy Lab, Sandia National Laboratories, Smart Growth Advocates, Colorado State University-Pueblo, Community Power Corporation (the Modular Biopower Company), the Western Area Power Administration, Eco Technology Solutions, the Governor's Energy Office and 25x25. In addition, the advice from U.S. Department of Agriculture, Colorado Department of Local Affairs, Colorado Department of Agriculture and others has been invaluable to furthering the many projects currently under review or in progress.

In addition, the Town, CSU-Pueblo and a group of local entrepreneurs are now processing 100 gallons of biodiesel daily, using waste cooking oil from sources around the region. It is anticipated that by year end, the plant will produce 1,000 gallons of biodiesel per day. Initial projections are that the production will be for consumption by municipalities and the agricultural community. Future plans call for a service station to sell biodiesel to the public, with the potential for expansion into other markets. Without the expertise of the CSU-Pueblo biology and chemistry departments, the transformation of waste oil to usable biodiesel would not have been possible. Town Administrator Wayne Snider is running his 1981 Mercedes 300D on this renewable fuel and states that not only has fuel economy improved, the engine runs smoother and the expected long term cost is much less than fossil fuel diesel costs today.

With all fronts for co-generation of energy being explored, conservation is the first step. A key element will be the shift in the way community residents view and handle their waste. Eventually, recycling with the possibility of utilizing biomass gasification for converting dry waste into inexpensive power is also under investigation. This becomes a behavioral modification for the public, with a good payoff in a reduction in cost of utilities for the Town, while working to solve the problem of waste disposal.

One avenue to initiate this change in thinking is being explored by the Town, CSU-Pueblo and the Fowler School District (R4J) to involve K-12 education through staff development for teachers and creating standards based curriculum. At the end of the 2007 school year, a campaign to stimulate interest and awareness of conservation and renewable energy through education was launched by hosting a variety of local presentations.

A Chinese proverb states "a journey of 1,000 miles begins with one step." The first step of assembling a team of residents, public officials and professionals with a common goal, has set the Town of Fowler well on its 1,000 mile journey with a sustainable purpose and a clear view of its goals in sight.